



Encounters with Rock, Snow and Ice (and Rain)

The American talks to US expat and artist Janet Johnson, who lives and paints in London, about her love of mountains and her upcoming exhibition at The Alpine Club

Where are you from in the US?

I grew up in the countryside near Hershey Pennsylvania, in Middletown which is near Three Mile Island. We lived on a farm that had wide open spaces and woods filled with deer for us to explore. I am the youngest of three sisters.

My mother was an artist and I was encouraged to draw with her while she got on with more serious pastel landscapes. She studied art and knew the famous horse illustrator Wesley Dennis - the children's book illustrator of *The King of Wind*, and *Misty of Chincoteague* fame. I visited his studio with her.

In the winter we used to ski down the small hill in our backyard, and go to our local slope Ski Roundtop topping out around 500 feet. My father was a very keen skier taking us with him as we grew up, last time we went out together was when he was 82, to Elk Mountain in northern Pennsylvania. He took us to Zermatt, Switzerland when I was 14, and I vowed to return. And I have returned to Zermatt over 20 times now.

What brought you to the UK?

My husband, David Sorrell, is English. We met while I was on a family ski trip to St Anton, Austria. I was studying painting at graduate

school in Florence, Italy at the time, and David was working on the oil rigs in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. So it was a very unlikely meeting. Our love of skiing brought us together and has lasted all these years...

What it's like to be an American living in Britain?

I am still asked how long am I staying - I've been here 30 years! I love the different turn of phrase for ordinary things. The humorous banter and wit is fun to join in with if you know the rules. The queuing is something I do naturally now.

The main thing I have grown to love recently about Britain is that I can walk out into the countryside, across fields and through woods on national pathways and rights of way which one can never do in the USA. Having recently had to sell the family farm in Pennsylvania it eases the loss of having a familiar stomping ground to wander across and contemplate the universe. I recommend it to visitors to the UK to get out of London and walk about and stop at a local pub along the way.

The South Downs Way is where we go for two day linear walks for fitness training and just because it's so beautiful with views to the sea to the south and the North Downs to the

north. Snowdonia and the Lake district mountains keep us going when we can't go to the Alps.

Why is your art so heavily focused on alpine scenes?

In 2008 I went on a week long trek across the alps on glaciated terrain, called the Haute Route - this was a life changing moment. I realised how inspiring it was to achieve what for me at the time was quite a physical challenge, never having done any alpine walking. Since then I have focussed on the views which can be sublime at every turn of the path in the mountains. Before that I was doing paintings of the rain and stormy weather in Britain. Alternatively I also like the quiet of walking or skiing through the woods when snow is lightly falling. I've painted a few scenes based on Robert Frost's poem, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. One of the images was used to promote a concert of Randall Thompson's *Frostiana* by the Hudson Chorale in New York.

Do you take part in any winter sports yourself?

I like ski mountaineering, or ski touring where we walk out into more isolated mountainous terrain and stay in huts overnight. Skiing in powder is something all skiers love.

Left: Janet with her husband David on the Pollux, a mountain between Valais, Switzerland, and the Aosta Valley, Italy

Ski touring is a big enthusiasm at the moment in Europe, and what is called backcountry in the USA.

How has being an associate member of the Alpine Club helped?

I have climbed up a few 4,000 meter peaks to see what all the climbing was about - like the Weissmies or the Pollux in Switzerland. The club has regular free lectures for members on climbing and ski mountaineering every month. These are an inspiration for me to try more difficult routes and adventures in the Alps. The club also promotes writing, photography and art produced by its members. The first climbers like Edward Whymper, of Matterhorn fame, were artists and printmakers recording what they saw on their trip up unclimbed mountains. There is an extensive library of books based on mountain themes, and climbing guidebooks. I was made an associate member of the club on the strength of my exhibition of watercolors and oils based on the Haute Route back in 2010.

How do you choose which materials to use?

I use watercolors initially as they allow me to capture the scene fairly quickly when I am working outside in situ, in what is called 'plein air'. I mostly do sketches, then work from memory and photos back in my studio in London. I have a wide range of blues, on a color swatch, that I use for different types of snow, clouds and sky. The sky is key to establishing the mood of a scene, as in the mountains they tell us what type of weather is coming or going. Oils are very good for capturing starry skies.

Does art help you to embrace the alpine experience?

I paint the scenes that stay with me, for either the external beauty or how I was feeling at the time. There



Janet Johnson, *Skinning up Cevedale from the Casati Hut, early morning light, Ortles, Italy* watercolor, 55 x75cm
IMAGE © JANET JOHNSON

is nothing like looking up at an inky black sky filled with more stars than one can count.

One of the routes you've painted is the Haute Route, does it have a personal significance for you?

The group of paintings started as a record from memory as I lost my camera on the second morning of the walking Haute Route, at the very first hut in France. On my return to the UK my mind's eye was filled to the brim with all this beautiful scenery so I put it all down as quick as I could by watercolor. The journey helped me realise I could do more than I thought. By just putting one foot after another I got there to the end of the Haute Route.

What are you hoping visitors take away from your upcoming exhibition at the Alpine Club *Encounters with Rock, Snow and Ice*?

What a wonderful place the Alps is to explore at any level of fitness. The paintings are all based on something I have experienced or seen there myself, walking across a snow ridge or skiing down the steep slopes.

What's the best thing about

being Janet Johnson?

That I know there is more to do and explore up in the mountains, and how that it makes me feel inspired each day to get up and get on my bike to keep fit! We are doing the Italian Haute Route, or Spaghetti Tour, taking in a string of 4,000 meter peaks in late August, so there should be a few sublime views to distill onto paper with watercolor or oil.

To see more of Janet's work go to www.janetjohnsonart.co.uk

Janet's exhibition is at The Alpine Club from September 22 to October 14 and at the Grand Hôtel Kurhaus, Arolla, Switzerland to August 2016. hotel-kurhaus@arolla.com

Alpine Club

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📍 Shoreditch High St Overground, Old Street

☎ 020 7613 0755 www.alpine-club.org.uk

Mon: 10 - 12am, Tues - Fri: 10 to 5pm, late til 7pm

on lecture nights. Or by appointment 10 to 5pm with the club, or the artist (mobile 07984287 611).

The club has regular free lectures for members, non-members welcome, i.e. the exhibition opening night - September 22, and on October 13.